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THE MAKING OF A PLAN FOR WASHINGTON CITY.

BY GLENN BROWN, F. A. I. A.

(Read before the Columbia Historical Society, January 6, 1902.)

The original map of Washington made in 1791 was the first plan drawn for a capital city of a great nation.

Other capitals have been a growth, beginning as villages without design, or thought of future progress or greatness, and in their gradual development from village to town and their final expansion into cities have been hampered by the original lines of roadways, the gradual addition of streets and suburbs, and the location of more or less important buildings, each roadway, street, or suburb having been laid out according to individual whim, with little or no consideration for a future city that would be a harmonious whole.

Gradual growth often produced picturesqueness; never stateliness or grandeur such as would befit a capital city. The authorities of many cities, after the countries of which the city was the capital had grown in wealth and power, have attempted with more or less success to remedy this want of a harmonious and effective original plan.

Paris has undergone many of such changes, the later ones under Louis XIV., Napoleon I., Louis Philippe, and Napoleon III. The last-named Emperor at enormous expense opened new avenues and boulevards directly through the city, so as to command the view of focal points, and beautified the city with parks and works of art.

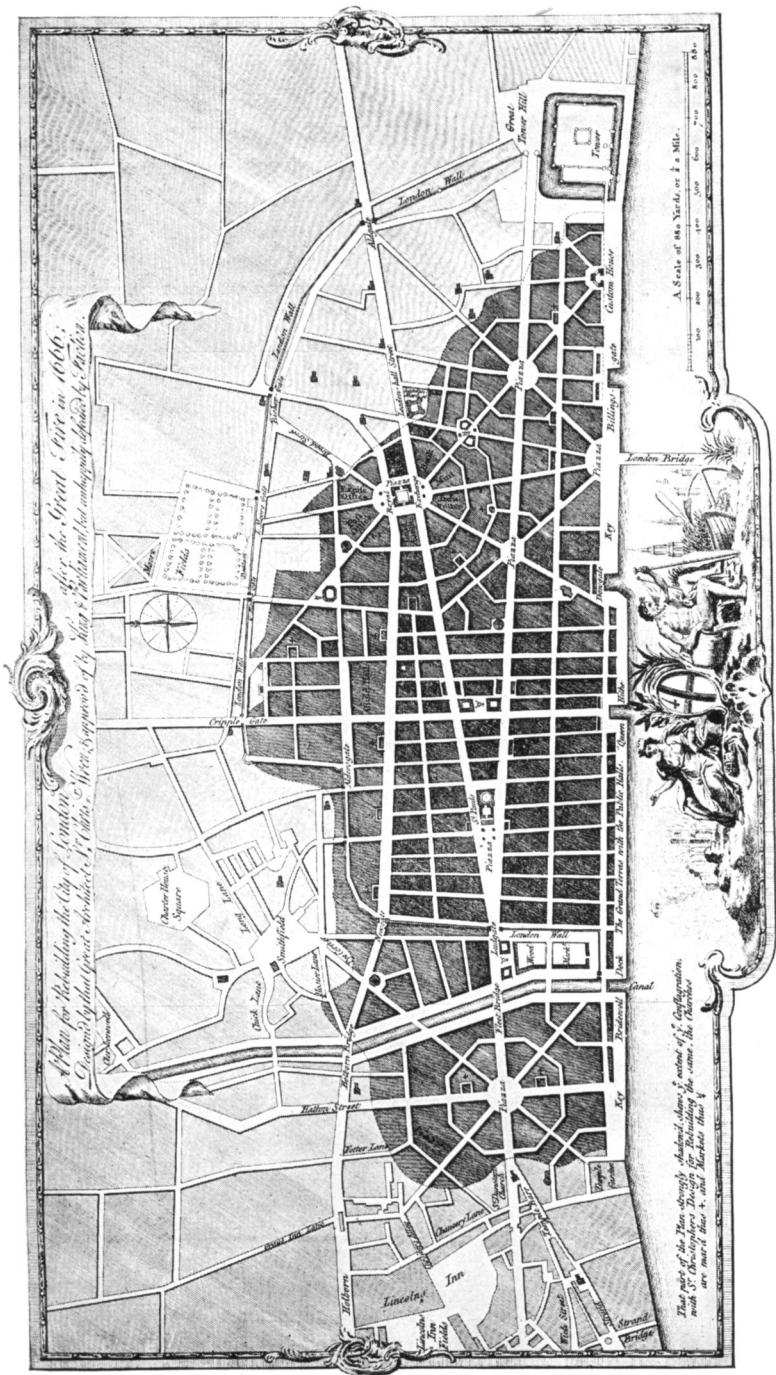
Although the effects accomplished in Paris, when viewed in connection with beautiful buildings, majestic arches, graceful columns, artistic statuary, and pleasing gardens, have been greater than similar accomplishments in other cities of the world, Paris is not what it would be if the great architects of building and landscape had been unhampered by existing conditions.

St. Petersburg was selected as the seat of the Russian Government in 1703, and was located on a site where no other city existed. Apparently little attention was given to its development on broad lines. It grew as other cities have grown, without thought of the grandeur of effect that might have been attained by a well-studied, original and comprehensive plan.

London, after the great fire in September, 1666, had an opportunity to make a complete rectification of the unhappy results unavoidable in the plan of a city developed by gradual growth. There was a determined effort made to take advantage of this opportunity. Sir Christopher Wren made a very clever and comprehensive plan, the first plan that I have been able to discover of a city with streets radiating from focal points.

The sites of prominent buildings, monuments, and columns were arranged so as to give pleasing objects of sight at the end of many vistas as well as open spaces which afforded opportunity for a closer view. Unfortunately the plan of Sir Christopher Wren was never executed. The difficulty of adjusting conflicting claims proved insurmountable.

The causes which influenced our forefathers to lay out a city on a grand and comprehensive scale are interesting topics for investigation. The data and precedent from which they evolved the noble plan presented in the map of the city of Washington are fascinating subjects for study.



A PLAN FOR REBUILDING THE CITY OF LONDON AFTER THE GREAT FIRE OF 1666.

Designed by Sir Christopher Wren.

During the first fifty years of the city's history this greatness of scale and the "magnificent distances" were a constant cause of ridicule with the thoughtless, and sneers from our country and Europe at the magnificent pretensions of the original plan, were frequent on the part of persons who could not appreciate the future of the United States. The grandeur of scale, as well as the character of the scheme which was approved, clearly indicated the confidence of the projectors in the future of our country. It was evidently their judgment that the best plan on a generous scale would not be too good or too large for the future capital of the United States.

General Washington, as a surveyor, a man of rare judgment, broad common sense, and great business capacity, was well fitted to conduct the scheme, and he selected the most skilled members of the profession of architecture and landscape who could be obtained to assist in the making of the city. He cautioned his assistants against vagaries in design and insisted upon following rules and principles as laid down by the older masters in their profession.

Washington was fortunate in securing Peter Charles L'Enfant, with whose skill he was well acquainted, to design the map for the new city. Washington and L'Enfant together made a careful personal study of the ground and located the site for the principle edifices and the focal points. The first or tentative draft was made and submitted to Washington, and after modifications the final map was drawn as we have it to-day. What influenced them in the general arrangement of avenues radiating from focal points of interest? Why was the Mall planned as an approach to the Capitol and the contemplated Washington monument, with a broad and extended vista on their axis?

L'Enfant did not attempt to draw up the scheme with-

out carefully studying what had been accomplished in other parts of the world.

What were the sources from which L'Enfant drew his inspiration in designing the plan? To what influence did Washington turn when making his criticism and modifications?

We know that L'Enfant wrote, April 4, 1791, asking Jefferson, Secretary of State, to obtain maps of London, Paris, Venice, Madrid, Amsterdam, Naples, and Florence, stating that it was not his wish to copy the plan of these cities, but that he might have a variety of schemes for consideration. We know from a letter of Jefferson's, April 10, 1791, that Jefferson sent him from his personal collection maps of the following cities: Frankfort on the Main, Amsterdam, Strassburg, Paris, Orleans, Bordeaux, Lyons, Montpelier, Marseilles, Turin, and Milan. The probabilities are that Jefferson obtained for L'Enfant the other maps for which a request had been made. A comparison of the maps of the cities mentioned, as well as other cities in Europe, proves that they supplied him with only isolated suggestions for the treatment which was adopted. The maps of London and Paris previous to 1800, clearly illustrate this point.

Paris, as we know it to-day, suggests more forcibly than other cities some of the marked features of Washington, the points of similarity being the Arch of Triumph and the Places of the Nation, the Bastille, Hugo, and the Republic, from which radiate avenues and boulevards. Probably the majority of people of the present day who are familiar with Paris assume that it was there L'Enfant found the idea on which he enlarged in making his design for Washington.

Napoleon I. began and Napoleon III. completed the system of avenues leading to or radiating from points of

interest. L'Enfant's map was engraved in 1792 when the first Napoleon was an unknown man. The Paris of 1791 had nothing in the arrangement of streets which, judging from L'Enfant's design, could have appealed to him. The numerous small squares and the parked way of the Champs Elysées may have suggested and probably did suggest the many small parks as well as the treatment of the Mall, which he adopted in his plan.

The first questions which would have presented themselves to L'Enfant in undertaking the solution of the problem would naturally have been the possible number of residents who might dwell in his city of the future and the size of a city to accommodate them. London in that day had approximately 800,000 inhabitants, and Paris at the same date had approximately 600,000 people. The areas which these cities occupied have been a site for village, town, or city for nearly two thousand years. They represented the capital cities of the two most powerful countries of the world in L'Enfant's time. With these data before him he fixed the area of the new city at about 16 square miles, which would accommodate, on the basis of the population of Paris, 800,000 people.

The boldness and foresight of these city makers is to be wondered at when we remember that at this period the population of the United States was about 4,600,000.

The next item for solution was the location of the principal buildings and commemorative monuments, with a view to place them so as to enhance their effect and at the same time so that they would become the crowning features of the surrounding landscape.

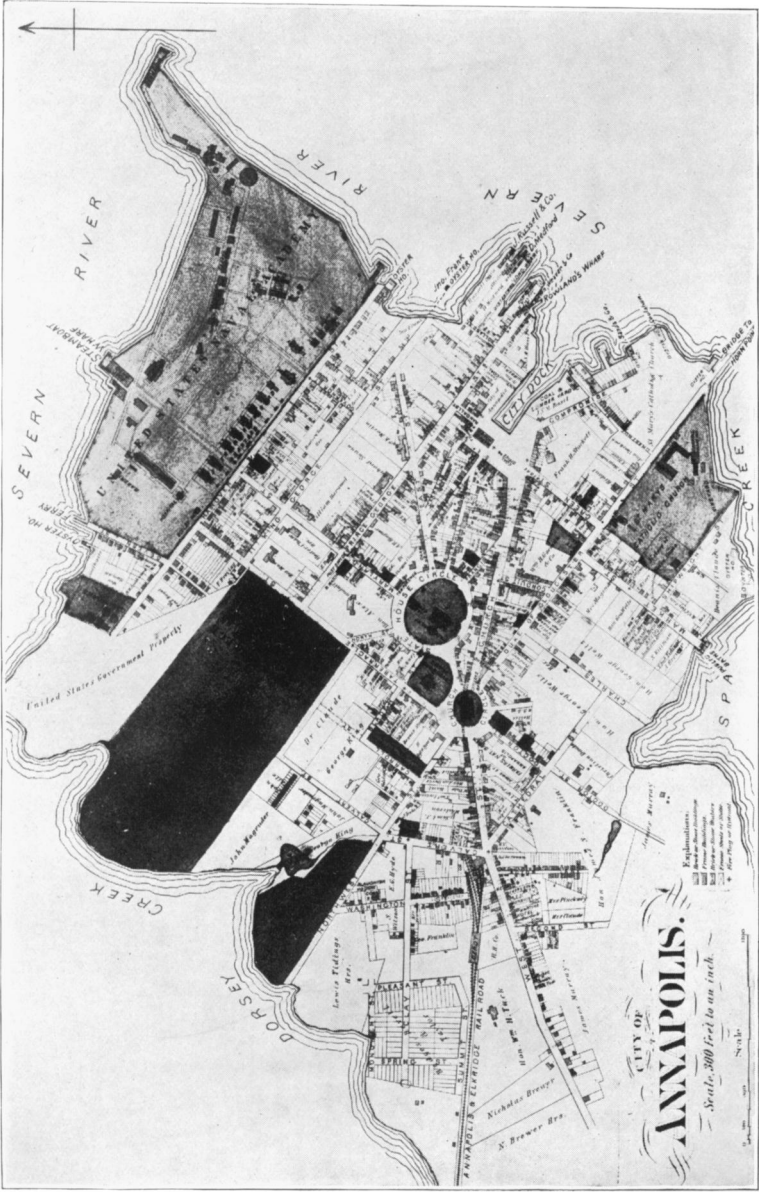
The map of Paris, as well as his personal knowledge, furnished L'Enfant suggestions for the location of palatial buildings, statuary, and monuments; but with the exception of the Champs Elysées few, if any, sug-

gestions were found as to location of such objects of interest so that they could be seen, enjoyed, and so that they would produce the happiest effect in connection with their surroundings. The Mall, as the grand garden approach to the Capitol, would naturally have suggested itself from a study of the Champs Elysées and of the more beautiful garden approach to Versailles.

How far should water effects be introduced as a feature in the new plan? L'Enfant in his request for plans of Amsterdam and Venice evidently had water effects in view, and carrying out this idea he suggests on his map a treatment of wharves, arranged for open views to the broad Potomac, and introduced a canal, with water basins and fountains, which would have added wonderfully to the beauty of the city if they had been carried out. A part of the water scheme was executed in the form of a canal, but this was turned into an open sewer and eventually arched and covered.

The most unique and distinctive feature of Washington, its numerous focal points of interest and beauty from which radiate the principal streets and avenues was not suggested by any city of Europe. Three streets converging toward a building or a square being the nearest approximation to the idea shown upon the map of any European city of that date.

As I have mentioned before, after the great fire in London in 1666, Sir Christopher Wren made a design for the rearrangement of the streets, and for grouping the various important buildings in London. This unexecuted plan of Wren's was apparently the first to suggest the radiation of streets from focal points of interest, and in it he had several such centers. Engravings of this map were published in various histories of London in L'Enfant's day. When Jefferson asked for maps of London there can be little doubt that



PLAN OF ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND.

this design was among the number sent to Jefferson and by him given to L'Enfant.

When Louis XIV. made Versailles one of his principal residences, Le Notre, who was the director of buildings and gardens for the grand monarch, laid out the garden of Versailles, one of the most pleasing, impressive, as well as magnificent pieces of formal landscape in existence at the present day. This was designed about 1662 and completed in 1669. In this garden we have a highly developed plan showing points of interest and beauty from which radiate avenues and walks. We can not question but that L'Enfant was familiar with this piece of landscape architecture, and it, together with the suggestion of Wren, we may reasonably assume, induced L'Enfant to try the same idea in the building of a city, instead of a garden, with radiating avenues; and also influenced him in the principal and most imposing feature of the Mall.

Although Washington had never been across the ocean, he was undoubtedly the man to study the maps of existing cities, from which, as has been already shown, that he could have found but little to influence him as suggestions for the final plan of Washington City. Washington was familiar with the cities in this country, and strange as it may seem there are suggestions in two of the small cities of the United States which may have influenced him in approving and modifying the scheme submitted by L'Enfant.

Annapolis has two focal points from which several streets radiate. It is stated in the older accounts of Annapolis that the plan was copied from Sir Christopher Wren's plan of London. This is probably a fact, taking a small section of London as a basis. It is most probable that Washington was familiar with the fact.

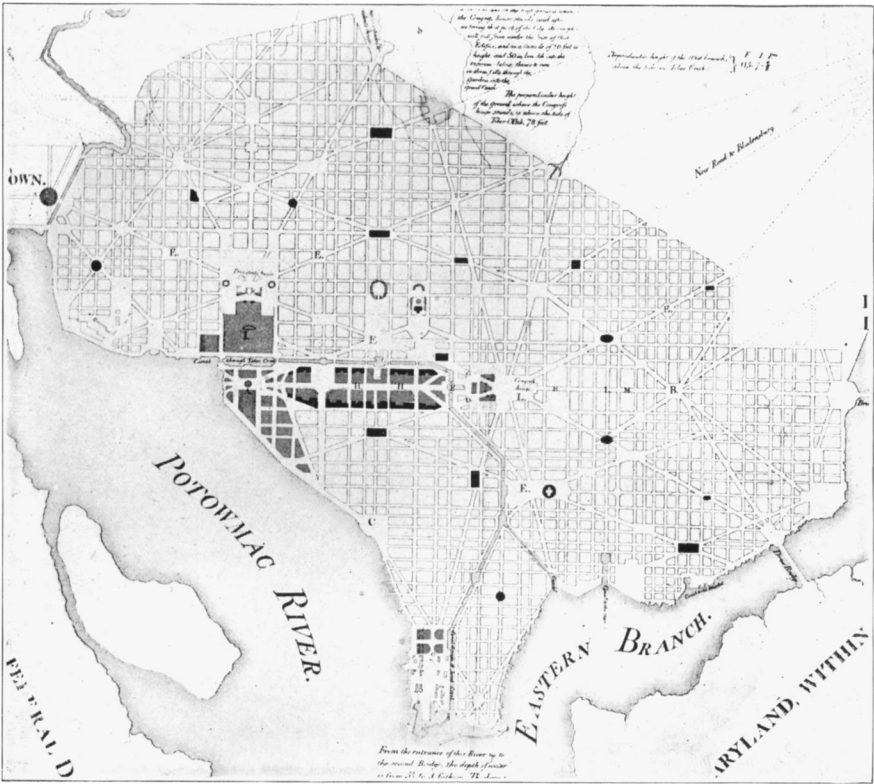
Williamsburg, Va., had a mall, a dignified tract of

green around which imposing colonial buildings were grouped and toward which the principal streets converged. Washington was familiar with these two cities and undoubtedly appreciated the pleasing effect of their plans.

He was thus ready to appreciate and indorse a suggestion of similar treatment, multiplied by numerous additional focal points, with vistas from one to the other, with the principal buildings located at the most prominent intersections, with a mall around which was to have been grouped many of the principal edifices.

Although I have endeavored to call attention to the data to which L'Enfant could and did have access and the surroundings which may have had their influence in the formulation of a plan for the city of Washington, I do not mean in any way to detract from his fame. All great artistic achievements have been a system of evolution and growth, usually a growth of long periods of time. It is truly remarkable, and proved L'Enfant a man of genius, that he evolved in a short period, and from the meager suggestions which he must have possessed, such an excellent and artistic scheme for a new and a great city.

The design indicated a comprehensive study of the streets, so arranged as to make effective distant vistas of the buildings, columns, fountains, and arches which were proposed, as well as to give the most direct access for business or pleasure; parks so located as to enhance the buildings and other art structures and give an opportunity for pleasing views upon near approach; the grouping of buildings along the Mall so as to produce harmonious and artistic effects as well as the best service for utilitarian purposes. I beg leave to quote from my "History of the United States Capitol": (Senate Doc. No. 60, Fifty-sixth Congress, first session.)



PLAN OF WASHINGTON CITY.

The more the scheme laid out by Washingeon and L'Enfant is studied, the more forcibly it strikes one as the best. It is easy to imagine a vista through green trees and over a green sward, 400 feet wide, beginning at the Capitol and ending with the Monument, a distance of nearly a mile and a half, bounded on both sides by parks 600 feet wide, laid out by a skilled landscape architect and adorned by the work of capable artists. Looking from the center open space across the park a continuous line of beautiful buildings was to have formed the background. They were not to have been deep enough to curtail either the artistic or natural beauties of the park or to encroach upon the people's right to an air space. By this time such an avenue of green would have acquired a world-wide reputation if it had been carried out by competent landscape architects, artists, and sculptors, consulting and working in harmony with each other.

The beauties and possibilities of this plan for the Mall and grouping of buildings were apparently forgotten after the days of Madison. Some seven years ago, while studying the location of buildings in connection with my "History of the Capitol," the remarkable beauties and utilitarian features of the plan were first called forcibly to my attention. They were so attractive that I felt constrained to write an article for the *Architectural Review*,* in Boston, on the subject, and in 1900 published another paper on the same subject urging the feasibility and desirability of reinstating this plan and building future Government buildings on the lines suggested.

At the meeting of the American Institute of Architects in this city in December, 1900, a number of prominent architects and artists were requested to read papers on the future treatment of parks and the groupings of

* Selection of Sites for Federal Buildings in Washington. The *Architectural Review*, Boston, Mass., Vol. III., No. IV., 1894. Suggestions for the Grouping of Buildings, Monuments, and Statuary, with Landscape in Washington. The *Architectural Review*, Boston, August, 1900.

buildings. They were asked for their individual ideas. It was a surprising fact that they all accepted the fundamental scheme of L'Enfant as the best, and only enlarged upon or suggested variations in detail.*

Last June the Senate District Committee appointed a commission, consisting of D. H. Burnham, C. F. McKim, Augustus St. Gaudens, and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., among the most prominent men in their professions in the country, all of whom have proved by their work a capacity equal to the best in the world to-day. After a thorough study of the subject for six months we hear that they think a return to the plan of L'Enfant in the treatment of the Mall and the future location of Government buildings is the proper thing. The changes made in the water line and by sale of Government property and the erection of inartistic structures located at haphazard will require many modifications and skilled handling, but we may only expect a successful outcome from the commission. Let us hope that Congress will see fit to approve their suggestions and return to the fundamental scheme as laid down by Washington and L'Enfant. When executed there will be no city in the world to equal Washington in its beauty and artistic results.

*Papers Relating to the Improvement of the City of Washington. Read before the American Institute of Architects December, 1900. Compiled by Glenn Brown, Secretary American Institute of Architects. Government Printing Office, 1901.